

Depression: A Treatable Illness

Depression is an illness that affects millions of Americans annually. Experts estimate that up to 10% of the adult population is experiencing depression at any given time.

Like most illnesses, depression is easier to recover from if it is caught in its early stages. Common symptoms of depression include:

- Significant increase or decrease in appetite
- Prolonged change in sleep patterns
- Chronic fatigue or lack of energy
- Lack of concentration/memory lapses
- Frequent physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)
- Loss of interest or pleasure in leisure activities
- Feelings of sadness, grief, guilt, hopelessness, or low self-esteem

Many of these symptoms are similar to the normal grief process one would experience after the death of a loved one, the breakup of a relationship, or an unwelcome change in life circumstance. However, if these symptoms persist for longer than two weeks, or if they are accompanied by self-destructive behavior or thoughts of suicide, then it is time to seek professional assistance.

Seeking counseling is an important first step in addressing depression. A counselor can help you determine the best options for addressing your depression symptoms, including:

Medical Evaluation

Visiting a doctor is an important part of addressing depression. A doctor can



evaluate for any medical conditions that may be contributing to the depressive symptoms.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is when a person talks with a professional counselor in an effort to evaluate and analyze feelings and concerns. The process of talking to an objective person about life experiences can help sort them out and may assist with changing negative styles of thinking and behavior that can contribute to depression. For some people, just a few sessions with a therapist may help alleviate their depression symptoms. Others may require a longer course of treatment.

In some instances, a therapist may recommend that a person consult with his or her personal physician or a psychiatrist to be evaluated for medication.

Medication

These days, pharmaceutical manufacturers are constantly advertising new medications to treat depression. Most of the newer anti-depressants are classified as “serotonin reuptake inhibitors.” These medications help alleviate depression by

normalizing the brain chemicals that regulate mood. Some people, however, respond better to medications called “monoamine oxidase inhibitors” (or MAOIs).

Many factors go into which medication is right for a particular patient, and a person may have to try more than one before finding the brand or combination that works best. (For instance, some people may need to take an anti-depressant in conjunction with an anti-anxiety medication.) Medications typically have to be taken for a few weeks before they provide relief from symptoms, and may result in side effects (sometimes temporary) such as headaches, nausea, insomnia, agitation, and difficulties with sexual activity.

For some people, going on medication is temporary; others may find they need to stay on it long-term to address ongoing depression. A physician or psychiatrist can help determine the best choices for medication and will work with the person’s therapist to monitor its benefits.

Addressing Depression Through Lifestyle Changes

In some instances, a physician or therapist may recommend that a person attempt to manage depression by making changes in her or his lifestyle. Some simple steps that have been found to help with depression include:

- **Exercise.** Studies show that exercising 30 minutes a day six times a week is an effective way to combat depression. Any form of exercise, such as walking, aerobics, weight lifting, or playing sports will produce benefits, particularly if

the person sticks with the routine over the course of several weeks.

- **Sleep.** Growing research indicates that getting sufficient sleep (seven hours a night is recommended) helps to regulate brain chemicals and alleviate stress. Sleep also helps promote a healthy weight, another factor in managing depression.
- **Diet changes.** Reducing salt, sugar, caffeine, and alcohol and increasing fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can have an impact on mood and overall well being.

Depression is a challenging illness, but it is possible to manage it and even recover. For more information on how to cope with depression, contact LifeMatters.

The above information is intended for educational purposes and is not intended to take the place of medical advice.

LifeMatters® professionals are available 24 hours a day, every day of the year to discuss a variety of lifestyle concerns. Call anytime.

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